

Commager fears cloak of secrecy

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By Robert H. Holden

The Central Intelligence Agency and related organizations cannot be reformed because they have developed a life and character totally resistant to change, Henry Steele Commager, the American historian, said yesterday.

"If we disapprove of their conduct and character we must scrap them and start over," Commager said. He suggested the country return to the comparatively innocuous agencies that handled intelligence gathering before World War II.

Commager, who was warmly applauded by several hundred persons at the City Club, said high federal officials who have sworn to sustain our constitutional system "do not understand it and do not believe that our government should be governed by it."

He identified President Ford and former President Richard M. Nixon as two who fit that description, adding that "they want to keep the people in the dark," espe-

cially in the cost of the intelligence gathering establishment and its conduct at home and abroad.

Commager, 73, specializes in American intellectual history. His widely used textbooks are among more than two dozen books he has authored or coauthored. Now professor emeritus at Amherst College, he is editing a 50-volume series called the "Rise of the American Nation."

Arguing for less secrecy in government, Commager said that the nation got along well enough from 1789 to 1941 without the current reliance on secrecy. Official secrecy and its companion, official lying, have led to an increasingly disastrous foreign policy, he said.

"We still are prisoners of the cold war paranoia," he said, which has led to more and more military spending. "This has been fatal to American democracy."

He made these two points about the elimination of official secrets, which may at times embarrass the government:

- "It's the business of our people to embarrass our government, that's what democracy means. It's true in Cleveland, Columbus and Washington, on every level of government."

- "Although the dangers of revelation are there, they are not serious, and can never endanger the survival of the nation. But the dangers of secrecy may destroy the nation, and even mankind."

Asked why America has failed to produce the great leaders it boasted in the past, Commager said it was because "we value private enterprise, not public enterprise." Instead of entering the government, talented people go into medicine, art and elsewhere, he said.

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